DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 586 CS 506 358

AUTHOR Littlefield, Kathy M.; Littlefield, Robert S.
TITLE KIDSPEAK: An Innovative Activity Program for Children.
PUB DATE 29 Sep 88
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Plains Regional Council of the International Reading Association (11th, Fargo, ND, September 29-October 1, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Critical Thinking; Elementary Education; *Extracurricular Activities; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; *Speech Instruction; Supplementary Education
IDENTIFIERS Speech Communication Education

ABSTRACT

KIDSPEAK, intended to promote the development of effective communication and critical thinking skills in children at the elementary and middle school levels, is an independently funded extra-curricular program providing a variety of relatively brief communication activities in a multi-disciplinary context. The program was developed and completed its first year of operation in both the Fargo (ND) and Moorhead (MN) areas. Materials were developed so that any teacher, regardless of experience in communication or critical thinking skills, could use them, and so that children would enjoy them. Six month-long units included: (1) basic public speaking skills; (2) oral reading; (3) creative expression and storytelling; (4) informing and persuading others; (5) argumentation and debate; and (6) communication etiquette. Instruction took place in small groups or individually. Though attrition over the six-month program was substantial, reactions to KIDSPEAK from administrators, teachers, parents, and children were positive. (An appendix contains four sample lessons from four different units.) (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED298586

KIDSPEAK: AN INNOVATIVE ACTIVITY PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN

Kathy M. Littlefield

Robert S. Littlefield, Ph.D.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert L Littlefield

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS506358

Ms. Littlefield is the Chair of the Social Studies Department at Fargo Shanley High School; Mr. Littlefield is Chair of the Department of Mass Communication, Speech Communication, Theatre Arts at North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota. This paper was presented at the 16th Plains Regional Reading Conference of the International Reading Association, Fargo, North Dakota, September 29, 1988.

KIDSPEAK: AN INNOVATIVE ACTIVITY PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN

Over the past decade, with growing clarity, members of all communities--business, education, science (to name a few)--have begun to espouse the importance of developing effective communication skills ("Focus on the Future," Governor's Conference on Public Education, 1986; The Kiplinger Washington Letter, 1987). Those recommending the development of programs to improve communication skills have suggested the result of this training to be being better jobs, more productive lives, higher self-esteem, and more positive personal relationships.

Some have suggested that in addition to improving communication skills, the need for training in critical thinking also exists (Mortimer Adler, "The Reform of Public Schools," The Center Magazine, 1983). Based upon his research, Adler reported that it was an error "to suppose that there is only one kind of teaching and one kind of learning, the kind that consists in the teacher lecturing, or telling, and the students learning what they hear said or what they find in textbooks" (p. 12). The ability to examine a problem or situation, analyze and solve the problems, and communicate about the subject to others would seem essential to most individuals as our population strives to cope with the myriad of social, economic, and political complexities facing our society today.

While much of the attention in the areas of developing effective communication and critical thinking skills has focused on the upper grades and post-secondary education, a growing

number of speech communication professionals have begun to explore the impact of these skills on children at the elementary school and middle school levels. The argument being raised suggests that if young children can develop their abilities to communicate effectively and think critically, they may have a more positive self-concept and be able to deal with difficult problems or situations more effectively. In addition, if provided with "small successes" early in their educational training, children might not experience as much communication apprehension or "stage fright" later in life.

Unfortunately, despite the growing awareness of how effective communication and critical thinking skills would enhance a child's opportunity to improve the quality of life in later years, programs currently teaching children these skills are few. There are a number of possible explanations for the absence of communication and critical thinking programs, including: (1) Lack of administrative or institutional support for the development of these programs at the elementary school level; (2) lack of interest on the part of the teachers who must present these subjects in their classes; and (3) limited opportunities for teacher training in the area of integrating communication and critical thinking skills into the elementary curriculum, (4) lack of time in the school day to add subject matter. If these explanations were not enough, few textbooks develop more than superficial treatment of developing public speaking and critical thinking skills.

Recognizing the existence of these barriers, the following question arose: How could a program be designed for elementary school children that would have the support of the administration, be attractive to the children participating in it, and be integrated into the existing curricula at the schools where it is adopted?

To address this question, the following subproblems were identified:

(1) What are the formats of programs currently offered to elementary school children?

(2) What kinds of programs have administrative support in school districts?

(3) What kinds of programs are attractive to children?

(4) What kinds of activities can be integrated into existing curriculas by teachers who might not have training in the acquisition of communication or critical thinking skills?

Cumulatively, the discussion of these subproblems should provide an answer to the question posed initially.

What are the formats of programs currently offered to elementary school children? In general, there are two program formats that are available for children: academic and extra-curricular. Academic programs are those which are integrated into the school day. These might include training in computer usage, art, or modern languages. Extra-curricular programs are endorsed by the schools but their availability is limited to

before or after school. Extra-curricular programs in many schools focus on athletic activities. However, there are other extra-curricular programs being developed in many schools, including, "Great Books" seminars and creative arts.

What kinds of programs have administrative support in school districts? Regionally, support for educational programs has been strained due to the economic base from which funding for education is drawn. As a result, administrators have been understandably reluctant to add new programs to their school systems unless the programs have had external funding through state or federal grants or were self-supporting.

What kinds of programs are attractive to children? Children are not that different from adults when it comes to what they like or dislike. For the most part, children enjoy programs that are interesting, challenging, and fun. They tend to participate if they feel good about themselves as a result of their involvement. In addition, programs that offer a variety of activities tend to be more attractive than those which involve a more limited set of experiences.

What kinds of activities can be integrated into existing curriculas by teachers who might not have training in the acquisition of communication or critical thinking skills?
With the number of required subjects set by state and federal administrators and various local school boards, there are few opportunities for teachers to introduce additional subject into the curricula at their schools. However, activities that require

limited introduction and demonstrate adaptability to any subject area often are attractive to not only the experienced teacher of communication or critical thinking skills, but also to those who have not had training in these areas.

In short, an extra-curricular program that was independently funded providing a variety of relatively brief communication activities requiring the acquisition of critical thinking skills and in a multi-disciplinary context would seem to be most desirable.

The absence of a such a program to teach oral communication and critical thinking skills in the Fargo-Moorhead area served as an impetus for the creation of KIDSPEAK, an after school activity program for children in grades three through six. As originally conceived, KIDSPEAK had as its goals the following areas of focus:

(1) The development of the child's ability to use his/her voice effectively through exercises designed to improve pitch, rate, volume, and vocal quality.

(2) The enhancement of the child's ability to use his/her body more effectively through activities to improve posture, gestures and movements, facial expressions, eye contact.

(3) The development of the child's ability to formulate ideas, develop them, and organize them into effective oral messages.

(4) The integration of vocal and physical aspects of

delivery through the use of practice and evaluation sessions by trained staff members.

(5) The improvement of listening skills by encouraging the child to develop positive feedback and responsiveness to the speaker.

Trained KIDSPEAK staff members worked directly with enrolled children in a classroom setting. Each month, a training session was held to familiarize the teachers with the lessons in the units being introduced. Some of the teachers did not major in speech communication. However, they were all interested in working with children in the acquisition of good communication and critical thinking skills. They were also enthusiastic about the program.

KIDSPEAK was designed to enable children to work in small groups and individually with the teachers to guarantee individualized instruction in the areas to be covered in each unit. A six-to-one student-teacher ratio was adopted as a primary component of the KIDSPEAK approach to public speaking and critical thinking training.

The content featured in the KIDSPEAK program was developed into month-long units. Six units were developed during the first year of KIDSPEAK. These included: Basic Public Speaking Skills, Oral Reading, Creative Expression and Storytelling, Informing and Persuading Others, Argumentation and Debate, and Communication Etiquette. There were four sections, or "steps to success" in each unit which addressed the use of the voice, use of body and

gestures, development of ideas or content, and practice. These "steps" were further divided into six specific lessons that the children would master (see Appendix for sample lessons).

Each unit was prepared in booklet form with exercises and activities to reinforce the subject matter being covered in the various class sessions. The booklets were also sent home with the participants so that their parents could review the materials being presented.

KIDSPEAK was offered during the months of October, November, January, February, March, and April during its first year of existence. During the first three months of the program, students met twice each week for fifty minutes. Responding to feedback from parents and teachers, this was changed to meeting once each week for one and one-half hours during the last three months. Enrollment varied throughout the year, with fifty-six children in April as the lowest level and eighty-five children in February as the highest level. The following table indicates the number of children at each grade level who were involved in the program at some time during the 1987-88 school year.

Table 1

Children Enrolled by Grade Levels in KIDSPEAK

6th grade	27
5th grade	42
4th grade	37
3rd grade	47
2nd grade*	10
Total	163

*includes experimental sesson with Academy for Children in April, 1988

The levels of participation varied throughout the year. In the following table, the length of involvement for each child is identified.

Table 2

Length of Participation in KIDSPEAK

1 month	65
2 months	32
3 months	27
4 months	14
5 months	14
6 months	12

A number of factors affected participation levels, including conflicting activities (such as soccer, basketball, track, and music lessons), transportation difficulties, and the weather. Each month, the parents of participating children were invited to a program where the children could demonstrate some of the skills they had been working on during the lessons each week. Certificates of Accomplishment were presented to each child upon completion of the unit.

In general, the parents were very supportive of the program and indicated orally and in writing that their children had demonstrated better communication skills at home or in other social situations. Teachers of children involved in KIDSPEAK commented that these children were good role models and they participated more actively in class discussions. The children felt that the activities were fun and that they were getting something out of the program.

The KIDSPEAK teachers found the materials to be very easy to present to the children. The lessons were straight-forward and

the children enjoyed the variety of activities each week. Because each lesson only took ten to fifteen minutes to complete, the children could move from lesson to lesson without losing interest in the subject. The content of each lesson revolved around the children and their families, interests, concerns, and hobbies; in other words, things with which they were familiar. This made it easy for the teacher to help the children to develop their ideas in a positive, familiar context.

The administrators in the four cities in which KIDSPEAK operated [Fargo (ND) Public Schools, Fargo Catholic Schools, Moorhead (MN) Public Schools, Moorhead Catholic Schools, West Fargo (ND) Public Schools, and Dilworth (MN) Public Schools] were very supportive. They felt that KIDSPEAK was a good program providing opportunities for some children that they might not otherwise be available within the existing systems. For the most part, the school systems were very cooperative in terms of distributing materials to the children and finding space that could be rented by KIDSPEAK for the after-school sessions. During the first year of operation, there were no direct costs to any of the schools involved for any KIDSPEAK activity. The entire program was subsidized by the parents of the children involved and the Directors of the program.

In summary, KIDSPEAK was developed as an innovative activity program for children to promote the development of effective communication and critical thinking skills. The program was endorsed by the administrators because it promoted two skills

that are widely promoted by all sectors of our society. In addition, because there was no expense to the schools, the program did not threaten any existing and funded options available in the schools involved. The materials were developed so that both experienced teachers in the areas of communication and critical thinking skills and those with less experience could use the materials and integrate them into the existing curriculas. The children enjoyed the program because it was different, challenging, and fun.

The creation of KIDSPEAK came about because there was a need to provide a program for the advancement of public speaking and critical thinking skills at the elementary school level. The available evidence from parents, teachers, and the children involved would suggest that KIDSPEAK is off to a strong start and has the potential for a bright future.

Appendix

SAMPLE LESSON #1 (TAKEN FROM UNIT ENTITLED, "INFORMING AND PERSUADING OTHERS")

"Volume Makes a Difference"

Whenever you speak, you should be aware of the size of the room in which you are speaking. If you are in a small conference room, you can speak quite quietly and still be heard. When you speak in front of a classroom in school, you must speak louder if everyone is to hear you. If you are called upon to speak in front of your entire school or church, you must "project" or push your voice to a louder volume. Knowing which volume to use in which room is an important lesson to learn.

First, pair up with a friend and talk in a quiet voice about the last move you saw.

Next, take a turn telling your entire group about the last movie you saw.

Finally, pretend you are in front of the entire school. Use a loud volume.

Which volume is right for the room in which you are now speaking?

SAMPLE LESSON #2 (TAKEN FROM UNIT ENTITLED, "STORYTELLING AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION")

"Movement"

Very often, storytellers will almost become an actor or actress and use movement to help demonstrate what is happening in a story. If a storyteller is sharing a "Winnie the Pooh" story, s/he might speak of Pooh walking across the field in a "lumbering" fashion. While saying this line, the storyteller might "lumber" across the front of the room. If Pooh decides to climb a tree to get the honey, the storyteller might pantomime the "climbing" movements. When the bees come out and sting Pooh, the storyteller might make a "jumping" and "running" movement to show how Pooh tried to get away.

To learn more about your own creativity, complete the following activities:

a. Move as though you were a rubber ball.
b. Melt like an ice cream cone.
c. Move toward an object. Leap toward it. Dart away from it. Zigzag toward it.

d. Move like a space ship heading toward the moon.
e. Move like you are walking through mud, water, clouds, gravy, jello, or marshmellows.
f. Walk barefoot over hot pavement.
g. Pretend you are a dried leaf floating on a pond.

SAMPLE LESSON #3 (TAKEN FROM UNIT ENTITLED, "ARGUMENTATION AND DEBATE")

"Closed-Ended Questions"

Closed-ended questions are best in debates because they call for shorter answers and help the questioner to keep control of the questioning period.

Working in pairs, ask questions of your partner that begin with "Did...," "Will...," or "Can...." Try to keep your partner answering with "yes," "no," or other short responses.

For example:

Q: Have you ever seen hockey players hit each other against the sides of the ice rink?
Q: Do dentists clean your teeth when you have check-ups?
Q: Do you go to school?
Q: Where do you go to school?
Q: Do you have any brothers or sisters?
Q: Are you going to take summer school this year?

SAMPLE LESSON #4 (TAKEN FROM UNIT ENTITLED, "COMMUNICATION ETIQUETTE")

"Preparing Your Notes for A Speech"

For this speech, you can use notecards. Don't try to write down everything you plan to say. Rather, write down words that help to remind you of what you have practiced to say.

For example, let's suppose you planned to say the following:

> "One of the most important events in my life was the birth of my brother. My parents took me to my grandparents' house and I waited while my brother was being born. When my Dad came to tell me the news, I could see on his face that I had a little brother. It was the most exciting day of my life."

On your notecard, you might write only the following words:

Birth of brother

Grandparents' house to wait

Dad told me . . . face . . . little brother

Exciting!

Plan your notecard carefully. What will you need to write in order for you to remember your speech?